

From the Heart

CW2 PAUL DEVINCENZO
Pennsylvania Army National Guard
Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa.

In the good old tradition of the military, our Army Aviation support facility recently changed command. As the AASF and airfield safety officer, I met extensively with our new commander regarding the unit's safety program. I reminded him that in accordance with Army Regulation 385-95, Army Aviation Accident Prevention, paragraph 1-6 (2), all commanders will establish a written commander's safety philosophy.

A new aviation commander, be it a second lieutenant or colonel, must take writing a safety philosophy letter very seriously. He should write the letter using his heart first and his brain second. That letter is sometimes his first official correspondence to the unit, and it might be published while his Soldiers are still forming their impression of him.

What kind of message does a "cookie-cutter" or "check-the-block" safety philosophy letter send to the unit? This is an excellent opportunity for new commanders to make a positive first impression, but many don't take the task seriously. Trust me, I've read my share of poor aviation safety philosophy letters.

They're often cold, emotionless, bureaucratic ramblings that simply regurgitate the Army's basic policy toward risk management and accident avoidance. The worst safety philosophies are the ones that look suspiciously like the previous commander's letter. Others might mimic the higher-level commander's safety philosophy.

A written safety philosophy isn't an officer evaluation report support form! You don't have to write it to be synchronized with your higher-level commander. There's no heart in those safety philosophies. This one is yours, not your predecessor's or your boss's.

The best safety philosophy letters I've seen aren't overly long, but they contain emotion and heart. A commander often will relate his previous experiences as a pilot or pilot-in-command. He might recount an accident, mishap or near-miss incident that left a profound impression on him. Emotion is perfectly all right in a safety philosophy letter. They add a human touch and show the commander cares about his people's safety.

We use risk management to make good, safe decisions, and references to the process are appropriate in a well-written safety philosophy. Emotion and heart, however, aren't appropriate in the risk management process. This is where a commander's safety philosophy must transcend the process. The safety of the unit's personnel and their family members is very much about emotion and heart.

New commanders should remember it's not a requirement to focus exclusively on aviation safety in their philosophies. Ground, POV and home safety are acceptable topics and should be included as well. Adding this information might also be helpful for relatively inexperienced aviation commanders who don't have a lot of experience to draw from.

That's my take on a commander's written safety philosophy after 26 years in Army Aviation. Not everyone will agree with me, but the beauty is the commander has the latitude to make his safety philosophy as personal, unique and emotional as he sees fit. When you write it, write it from the heart. Your Soldiers deserve nothing less.